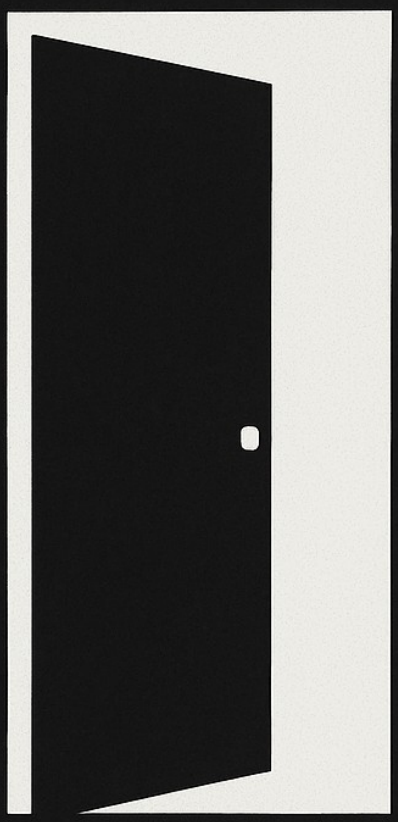
AUTONOMY



Ek Noor

Title: Autonomy

Two Plays on Patriarchy, Power, and Freedom

by Ek Noor

Dedicated to all who choose their own path.

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Preface

Autonomy was written to spark conversation and, I hope, to inspire courage. The story is not just about one woman's struggle but about the invisible rules and unspoken fears that shape so many lives.

Theatre at its best belongs to everyone. May this play encourage dialogue, empathy, and a deeper commitment to freedom and dignity for all.

Two Plays on Patriarchy, Power, and Freedom

Part I: The Watcher
Part II: The Marriage Proposal

The Watcher

Character List

Raj (40s): Traditional, respected in the Desi community. Believes he must preserve culture. Earnest but unraveling.

Nikki (mid-30s): Of Desi heritage, married to a white British. Independent, educated, and self-contained. Clear boundaries.

Steve (40s): Raj's English friend, quiet observer, truth-teller.

Jane (30s): Nikki's close English friend, protective and outspoken.

Desi is a colloquial term used by South Asians to describe themselves and their culture, especially in diaspora communities.

ACT I – The Watcher

Scene I

A knock at the door.

Nikki *(offstage)*: Coming!

She opens the door. Raj stands with a polite but firm expression, holding a box of Desi sweets.

Raj: Nikki. I was nearby… thought I'd check in. The community worries.

Nikki *(measured)*: The community, or you?

Raj *(forcing a smile)*: Both. Your parents would want someone looking after you.

Nikki: My parents never asked you to be their voice.

Raj: We don't live alone. We carry a name, a legacy.

Nikki *(calm, firm)*: You don't get to summon the dead to punish the living.

Raj shifts, uncomfortable.

Scene II

Park bench. Afternoon. Raj sits. Steve arrives with tea in two takeaway cups and hands one to Raj. Raj speaks calmly.

Steve: You look like a man carrying the world.

Raj: Sometimes it feels that way.

Raj: She's… lovely. Nikki. Strong. But she married a gora, you know not one of us. It twists inside me.

Steve: Why?

Raj: Because it shouldn't be that way. Marriage is family, culture, community.

Steve: Or maybe love. Rules keep you safe, but at what cost?

Raj: I must know more. About her, about him.

Steve: Why?

Raj: Patriarchy. A man must guard.

Steve: Guard, or control?

Raj: The Desi network will tell me all.

Steve: Is that ethical?

Raj: This is our culture. We ask what preserves us.

Raj looks away, torn. Children laugh in the distance.

Scene III

Same bench. A few weeks later. Raj paces. Steve watches. Raj speaks feeling frustrated.

Steve: Not seen you for a while. Are you Okay mate?

Raj: Nothing! No relatives, no friends. She doesn't exist in our circles.

Steve: Maybe she chose to move on.

Raj: No, there must be someone.

Steve: Or maybe she doesn't need that thread.

Raj *(sitting)*: Steve… I feel for her. I want her. I need to pressure her to leave him.

Steve: Pressure? That's not love.

Raj: I'm wealthy. A property portfolio. A suitable match.

Steve: That's a transaction, not love.

Raj: I need to look after her. Keep her safe.

Steve: Look after, or control?

Raj *(softly)*: I've fallen in love with her.

Steve: You have a wife and kids?

Raj *(irritated)*: Yes...yes..they are duty and not love! This is how I grew up! If I didn't go along with the community, I would have been dissed with, "what will people say" so I conformed!.

Steve: Are you sure?

Raj: Yes of course! And still… nothing. Nikki! Nikki! No trace. Then I'll ask at her work.

Steve: That’s intrusion.

Raj: Lines mean nothing if I cannot reach her. If colleagues won’t speak, I’ll hire a private detective.

Steve *(alarmed)*: That’s obsession and want to own her?

Raj *(cold)*: Then let it be obsession. I will not stop.

Raj clenches his fists.

Scene IV

Same bench. A few weeks later in the evening. Raj already seated. Steve approaches. Raj speaks exacerbated.

Steve: Are you okay mate? Not seen you around.

Raj *(bitter)*: I tried her workplace. Nothing! How can she live unknown?

Steve: Maybe she wants her life to be hers alone.

Raj: Sometimes… I wonder if I’m wrong. No, no...it’s my culture. I have never felt like this before. She belongs with me and us. There must be a way in.

Steve: You talk like she’s a prize. She’s a person.

Raj: I can give her safety. Comfort. A future.

Steve: Safety to you may feel like chains to her.

Raj: I only want her to see me. I cannot stop.

Silence. Steve watches him with sorrow.

Scene V

Same bench. Afternoon. Raj sits forward, restless. Steve arrives with tea in two takeaway cups and hands one to Raj. Raj speaks excitedly.

Steve: Not seen you for weeks. Are you okay mate?

Raj: Steve, she is… incredible. A great job, respected. She's achieved more than most in our community.

Steve: Then admire her. Respect her choice.

Raj: That makes her even more perfect. She shouldn't be wasted with him.

Steve: Wasted? You speak as though her life is yours to measure.

Raj: She deserves someone equal. Me.

Steve: You twist admiration into obsession. That's the danger.

Raj grips the bench, lost in fixation.

ACT II – The Mirror

Scene I

Park bench. Afternoon. Nikki sits with Jane. Nikki looks uneasy.

Nikki: Jane… I feel watched. At the shops, near work, even here.

Jane: By who?

Nikki: Raj. The way he turns up. The questions he asks.

Jane: That's dangerous. He's crossing lines.

Nikki: I set boundaries. He ignores them.

Jane: He's circling you. He's obsessed.

Nikki: That's what frightens me. And strangers are asking about me…my past, my family.

Jane: Then it's him. He's prying. This is serious.

They sit in silence. Jane squeezes Nikki's hand.

Jane: You won't face this alone.

Scene II

Park bench. Another day. Nikki and Jane sit.

Jane: I haven't seen you for a while, I am worried about you. You Okay?

Nikki: Jane, am I paranoid? Or is this real?

Jane: It's real. And you need to take it seriously. Maybe talk to your GP.

Nikki: At work, someone asked if my brother had an arranged marriage. Odd. I said it was an introduction. But it shook me.

Jane: He's pulling strings. Don't ignore this.

Nikki: I feel on edge. Especially when my hubby's away. Sometimes my vision blurs.

Jane: Then get a check-up. Promise me.

Nikki: Alright. I promise.

Jane grips her hand, protective.

Scene III

Park bench. A few days later.

Jane: I have been worried about you and haven't seen you for days. Did you see the GP?

Nikki: Thank you for making me see the GP. I have high blood pressure. They've put me on medication.

Jane *(angry)*: This is wrong. It's harming your health. Tell the police. I have been scared by men watching in the past. I know how you feel.

Nikki: No. It may make it worse. The community may gang up against me.

Jane: You must get help. Tell the police.

Nikki: They'll think I'm paranoid. Judge me.

Jane: Then let them judge. You need protection. I won't take NO for an answer.

Nikki *(reluctant)*: Alright. I'll tell them.

Jane exhales, resolved.

ACT III – The Unraveling

Scene I

Park bench. Raj sits alone, restless. Steve arrives. Raj speaks reflectively.

Steve: Look Raj, I haven't seen you for a while. I am worried about you, I think you should seek some help.

Raj *(tired, low)*: Steve… I see it now. Patriarchy, silence, all the feelings I buried… they've twisted into obsession. I thought I was guarding culture. I was guarding a prison inside myself. I suppressed feelings which hurt me now. Life is not about performance, it is about living as your true self.

Steve *(gently)*: At least you see it.

Raj: The police came. Asked questions. I felt small. Embarrassed. Like a child caught lying. Nikki doesn't deserve this.

Steve: What did they say?

Raj: What they said made me soul search for days…..

Steve: and…..

Raj: I am all mixed up. I am not in love with Nikki. I am envious and jealous of her freedom.

Steve: What do you mean?

Raj: I am stuck in a culture where there are rules. To perform, I have to suppress my feelings and emotions.

Steve: Man that sounds tough.

Raj: You are right, I wanted her to conform to our values because she is a woman. I hated and envied her freedom.

Steve nods but says nothing more.

Scene II

Outside Nikki's home. Evening. Nikki opens the door cautiously. Raj stands there, humbled.

Raj *(quietly)*: Nikki… I came to apologize. For watching. For prying. For making you feel unsafe. I lost myself.

Nikki *(measured, steady)*: And now?

Raj: The police questioned me. I was ashamed. But the truth is… I was wrong. I let fear and pride become obsession. I only ask forgiveness for the harm.

Nikki *(firm, unyielding)*: Forgiveness is not mine to give. What matters is that it stops here. My life is mine. My choices are mine. They are not yours to claim or control.

Raj *(nodding, softly)*: It will. I see that now. I thought you were one of us and I had rights over you. To protect you...but...but..my suppressed feelings all my life drove me crazy. Of course, you are you. I now see, it is a culture that made me so. It damaged me by never allowing my feelings and emotions, the hurt, that also hurt you. Of course you or anyone else must live as they wish to. The choices must be accepted. We must change. Sorry……sorry...

He lowers his head, turns, and walks away into the night. Nikki remains in the doorway, shoulders squared, unshaken. The light lingers on her, not him ….a final image of strength and autonomy.

Nikki: This door doesn't open for anyone but me.

She shuts the door and bolts it!

Title: The Marriage Proposal

Characters list

- **Mo (late 70s)**: Patriarchal head of the clan, insecure and manipulative.
- **Kim (early 70s)**: Mo's gossiping wife, supportive of his schemes.
- **Nikki (mid 30s)**: Independent woman, married to a white man ("gora"), owns her own properties.
- **Sunny (60s)**: Mo's associate, helps spread manipulation among men.
- **Raj (40s)**: A suitor brought in later, opportunistic, part of Mo's schemes.
- **Nikki's Elder Relative (80s)**: A Canadian woman, rational and supportive of Nikki.

Prologue – The Return of Raj

A single spotlight. Raj steps forward, alone. He addresses the audience directly. His voice carries both weariness and bitterness.

Raj:
They thought I was finished.
That when she shut the door... bolted it...I would fade into the night.

But a man doesn't disappear so easily.
They called it obsession. The police questioned me, shamed me.
And still… I couldn't let her go.

You see, Nikki was more than love. More than freedom.
She was a wound. A challenge.

She married a gora, stood above us all... as if our rules meant nothing.

So I changed my face.
No more watcher at the window. No more having her watched.

Now I move with the clan, with Mo, with Kim.
If I could not win her heart, I would claim her life. Her wealth. Her future.

One way or another… she will be ours.

(He steps back into shadow.)

Act I: The Plot

Scene 1: Mo and Kim's Living Room

(Kim whispers excitedly, and wide eyed.)

Kim: Mo, did you hear? Nikki married a gora ... a white man! And guess what? Every property's in her name. Her husband doesn't even touch the money!

Mo: *(frowning, scowling)* A gora? Shameful. Our women marrying outsiders...it weakens us. And those properties? They should never stay with her.

Kim: *(smirking)* Maybe Pally's the answer. We can push it through.

Mo: Your nephew? That boy's useless...drugs, crazy... but if he marries her, um... all that wealth becomes ours.

(They exchange a scheming glance.)

Act II: Escalation

Scene 1: Nikki on the Phone with Kim

Nikki: *(voice over the phone, angry, firm tone)* Kim, your nephew is stalking me. Harassing me. This is criminal... tell him to stop!

Kim: *(forced laugh)* Oh, Nikki...you're exaggerating.

(Mo grabs the phone from Kim.)

Mo: Listen, girl! You think you're better than us? You marry a gora and suddenly you're above us? Obey, or I'll throw you to the dogs.

(He slams the phone down. Kim looks unsettled but stays quiet.)

Scene 2: Mo Calls Sunny

Mo: *(on the phone)* Sunny... she married for love. That makes her weak, gullible. Spread it around, she's a prize. Whoever takes her, takes her fortune.

Sunny: *(on the phone)* Leave it to me. The men will come running.

(Lights dim as whispers of harassment and schemes play in the background, symbolizing the clan's men targeting Nikki.)

Act III: Psychological Games

Scene 1: Mo and Sunny Meeting

Sunny: Mo, nothing's working. She resists it all... stalking, harassment, even when we made the road her punishment.

Mo: Then we break her mind. Cult tactics... isolate her, confuse her, make her doubt herself.

Sunny: *(hesitant)* Mo...that's dangerous.

Mo: Do it. No questions.

Scene 2: Raj Enters the Picture

(Raj, speaking softly on the phone with Mo.)

***Raj**: (speaking softly, urgent, controlled)* Mo, she's something else. A walking fortune… but more than that. She's strong. Untouched by our rules. She humiliated me before the police. I will not let her win again. Find out everything… hire detectives if you must."

***Mo**:* Then take her. We'll find out everything…check her friends, networks, detectives, the lot!

***Raj**: (quiet intensity)* Do it. She resisted me once. She won't again. I want her.

Mo: Already in motion. She'll be yours. She must obey!

Act IV: The Marriage Proposal

Scene 1: Mo and Raj Planning

Raj: I've got an idea. If we reach her eldest relative, we can push her, through them.

Mo: Yes. The elders hold the sway. We'll tell them, her gora husband won't care for her, when she's old. Promise them she'll have stability with you.

Raj: *(smirking, bitter)* Perfect. She shut the door in my face once. But doors can be forced open through family.

Scene 2: Mo Calls Nikki's Elder Relative

Mo:*(on the phone with fake politeness)* Madam, Nikki needs guidance. Her marriage is unsuitable. We can offer her tradition...stability...

Elder Relative: *(on the phone, calm, firm, cutting in)* Nikki can make her own choices. I don't need you to speak for her. She's always known her own mind... you just have to listen....

(Mo slams the phone down in rage.)

Mo:*(furious)* These goras know nothing of our ways! These new ways are a disease...

Raj: We can't back out now. If she chooses freely, I lose everything. She must be controlled.

Act V: The Collapse

Scene 1: Final Call

(Mo and Raj pacing anxiously.)

Raj: Well? Any progress?

Mo: Nothing. She's gone to the police.

Raj: *(alarmed, angry)* The police? Again? First they questioned me for watching her… now this. She's turned it all against me.

Raj: *(panicked)* So, what do we do now?

Mo: *(defeated):* We've lost.

(They look at each other, defeated. The weight of their schemes collapsing. Mo slumps, looking exhausted, into his chair...pause.)

Mo: *(bitter and mumbles)* The world's gone mad… women forgetting their place…

(Lighting shifts away from Mo and rests on Raj.)

Raj: *(broken, slumps on his knees and stares at the floor...)*

We tried to imprison her...*(pause, the words hang in the air, as if he's just realised the truth)...* but we are the ones imprisoned...

(Pause. His shoulders rounded, gaze lowered. Pause, nodding, before he slowly raises his eyes is crucial; it signals a flicker of self-realization. Softly, almost as an admission to himself, not as a plea or a speech to others.)

Maybe...it's time to let go…and change….? *(pause)*

(Lighting shifts gently away from Raj and settles fully on Nikki, standing confidently, free and resilient. She faces the audience.)

Nikki: *(firm, empowered)* I am Nikki!...No one decides for me. Not tradition. Not greed. Not fear... This door doesn't open for anyone but me... My life is mine!